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ABSTRACT

Factors that are important to a partnership are addressed, based on cooperation between Brigham Young University (BYU) and five public school districts. Examples are derived from the work of the field experience committee, one partnership group. It is emphasized that a partnership is based on mutual respect of each other's competencies (the university's and the schools'). Mutual trust means that the university and the school districts attribute the best possible motives to each other's words and actions in the mutual effort for educational improvement. In the process of building trust, it was learned that "little details" and listening to each other are important. Without communication, fears are enlarged because of an accumulation of negative past experiences. Details that turned out to have significance to partnership building included: setting a meeting time, recording attendance and absence at meetings, and sending a reminder a day or so before the meeting. The views of university and public school teachers about the partnership were solicited. While the idea of cooperation was valued, many teachers feared change, added time demands, and elitism in choosing partner schools. Both the university and public school were afraid of being taken over by each other and dictorial administrators. (SW)

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A University Faculty Member's Perspective: Lesson Learned From a Partnership Experience

By Lillian Heil

April 1986

Setting for a Partnership

The university partner is a private church owned institution with a student body of about 26,000. The public school partners are the five districts closest to Provo, the town in which the university is located. The five districts are Provo, Nebo, Alpine, Wasatch and Jordan.

Initiation of the Partnership Idea

Ralph Smith came to his job of Dean of the College of Education of Brigham Young University a few years prior to normal retirement age; so he is a leader in a hurry. He announced the beginning of the partnership between BYU and five neighboring school districts in April 1984. In the late fall 1984, the administration of the college, under the leadership of the associate dean, formed committees to study areas of concern within the BYU education programs. I was asked to head the committee of field experiences, whose members were from every department plus the librarian in charge of the education collection. At our second meeting both the dean and university members agreed that field experiences involved both public schools and the university so public schools must be represented on our committee. That, in a sense, was the beginning of our involvement in the planning of the partnership.

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Overview of Lessons Learned

A partnership is defined in the dictionary as the relationship between two or more competent persons who have contracted to share the profits. Two words, competent and share, focus on the central theme of lessons I have learned from a partnership experience. That central theme is trust which is firmly based on mutual respect (of each other's competencies) among a university and five public school districts who believe they can benefit (share the profits) from working together as partners. Another way to state the theme is that mutual trust means the university and the five school districts attribute the best possible motives to each others words and actions in the mutual enterprise to improve the schools.

In the process of building trust, I learned that what are often termed little details are not little and that people who trust each other listen to each other. The negative side to this is what happens when there is no communication. Then fears are enlarged because of an accumulation of negative past experiences. Examples from the work of the field experience committee--a mini partnership group--will show how the lessons were learned.

Building Trust with University Members

Building trust was accomplished by attention to so-called little details and listening to each other. The first little detail was setting a meeting time. I spent more time than I wanted to collecting schedules, talking to members, checking back and finally settling on a time. This process was an important detail because the personal contact let them know their presence was valued and their other time commitments were respected.

The second little detail was spelling names correctly. I discovered this when I found a member's name spelled two ways and asked him which was correct. He told me the correct spelling and described how he had once explained the cultural origin of the unusual spelling only to have his listener respond by telling him he was still wrong. Obviously his listener was not getting the message that a name symbolizes a valued heritage and the equally important fact that each person has a right to choose any spelling he or she wishes.

The third detail was recording attendance and absence at meetings. I had decided that members would come when they could so I would always record them as attending or excused rather than attending and absent. I was amused to have another chairperson read our minutes and say, "I don't excuse any of my members" in almost the same breath as he complained that he couldn't get enough members together to make decisions.

The fourth detail was making it easy to remember meetings by sending a timely reminder a day or so before the meeting. I also learned that changing the format of minutes could be a booby trap for speed readers. One member could have attended a meeting but did not come because he didn't realize the longer than usual minutes continued on the back of the page and that's where the time and place of the next meeting was listed. I learned what advertisers already know--get the important message on the first page.

At our first meetings we learned to listen to each other. We sounded as if we were muddling around on any topic that caught our fancy but we were really getting acquainted and building trust by listening to each other's frustrations and past experiences.

Building Trust with Public School Members

Starting in January 1985 and with encouragement from the college administration we asked for public school people to be added to our committee. Partnerships in the process of forming themselves aren't quite as fast as we wished but by April we held our first meeting with our new members. Again, I learned the importance of little details and of listening as part of the process of building trust.

Our first meeting was held on the BYU campus. The BYU members arrived at or before 3 pm and sat down in a circle facing each other, wondering if and when the new members would arrive. They came in ones and twos, each entering the door with an apologetic but exasperated comment about not being able to find a parking place and having to walk from lower campus or from off campus to get to the meeting room. Parking details were sending a variety of messages that might be as follows:

You're not part of the university so you can't park here.

There's no place for you--how can you be an equal partner if there's no place for you?

You aren't doing an important job. You can leave earlier in order to have time to park far away and still be on time.

So the first item on the April minutes was one of the most important--either get parking permits or meet in the Continuing Education Building where visitor parking is amply available.

I started several times to explain the purpose of our commitee and what we'd been discussing. Perhaps because of the interruptions as our disgruntled public school people straggled in, I couldn't tell if there was any involvement. Few comments came from our new members and it seemed to me that they

were waiting and I didn't know for what. I don't remember what started the flow of responses about field experiences from their perspectives, but the comments did begin and soon I had trouble writing fast enough to keep up as the meeting came alive. Another example of how important it is to listen in order to start building trust with our public school members.

Building Trust in the Governing Board

At our summer meetings so many questions were raised about our purpose and goals as a committee that the Associate Dean attended our meetings to answer those questions. He began to use us as a sounding board for ideas on partner schools. These would be schools under the auspices of the partnership and would serve as centers for preservice, inservice, curriculum development and research. He presented proposals to the Governing Board and then would speedily report back to us so we felt we were part of the partnership process. The Governing Board added to that feeling by offering us the responsibility or writing a proposal and application process for partner schools. The proposal was to be completed by February 1986.

Response of Public School Teachers and University Teachers to an Imposed Idea of Partnership

In the Fall of 1985 as we turned our attention towards writing the proposal for partnership schools, we became increasingly aware of the need to find out how public school and university teachers felt about the idea of working closer together. They had not been the creators of the partnership. The partnership decision had been made by their top administrators.

To find out how public school teachers felt about working with the unviersity, a questionnarie was carried to the four closest districts in the partnership. The

answers affirmed public school teacher belief in the importance of field experiences and their frustrations at the small amounts of money given to cooperating teachers and at college supervisors who do not listen, who do not communicate what student teachers should learn, and who do not spend enough time in the classroom.

To find out feelings about the newly announced partnership, informal questions were asked of both university and public school teachers. Both groups said the partnership was a good idea and would improve both school and university programs for new teachers.

However, the public schools expressed fear of added time demands. Their day has never been long enough for all they are asked to accomplish. Elitism was feared with the choosing of partner schools. The fear was that the key school would be considered by both parents and district as the best school with the best teachers. I have alrady seen this in action as two teachers made disparaging remarks about a peer who is the principal of a school being considered as a partner shcool. The principal in question also reported that fellow principals now bristle at even ordinary suggestions he makes at principal meetings.

Change was feared. If a partner or key school is supposed to be open to change, what will prevent it from changing too often--or changing simply for changes sake. Who decides what research will be helpful to students?

Both the university and the public school were afraid of being taken over by each other. Public school people did not think universities paid enough attention to their expertise and vice-versa. Public school teachers have had bad experiences with university supervisors who tried to dictate their time schedules or advocate methods that flopped when tried. University teachers have watched student teachers sturggle to learn to teach with a public school

teacher who was a mediocre model. University faculty members were fearful of being dictated to by public school people, who in their opinion knew nothing about research and were likely to spend their time reinventing the wheel. Public school people have assented to research studies but never heard the results or known if there were any conclusions that could improve their teaching.

Both public school teachers and university faculties were fearful of dictatorial administrators--even if they liked the idea being dictated. One public school teacher was convinced that his superintendent did not think teachers were important. University faculty reported concern because they didn't get reports on the progress of the partnership and would like to know what was happening.

Summary

The positive and the negative things I've learned--building trust by way of important "little details" and listening to each other versus fears of additional time investment, elitism, change, partner takeover and administrative imposition are two sides of the same issue. Without trust, the fears grow. I find it rather scary that negative past experiences can have such a powerful effect on people's willingness to trust each other. I recognize that it operates in my own life. When I have repeatedly had someone fail to keep an agreement or live up to an expectation, I quit expecting that the person will do so, even if he or she declares an intent to change. I treat the person the same way as society has a reputation for treating the exconvict or exdrug addict.

The expectation is that most exconvicts will return to prison and most exdrug addicts will return to addiction. As I think about this problem, the thought occurs that the exconvict needs to be trusted to make changes in his life more than the solid citizen

because he's experienced more failure. He trusts himself less. The person who is making a change trusts himself less too, because change is hard and he or she may doubt his ability to act differently. The superintendent who is considered to be overly dictatorial, the teacher who has a reputation for being a poor teacher, all are in the ironic position of needing more trust if they sincerely desire to change, but getting less trust.

So in a partnership situation, the responsibility for developing trust on all levels rests as heavily on the other person as it does on the one who has made the decision to initiate changes established ways of thinking and behaving. It requires the level of trust described in the introduction--attributing the best possible motives to those in the partnership. Public school teachers will have to help university supervisors who say they want to listen better; university faculty members will have to trust that a teacher, who expresses the desire to work more closely, sincerely wishes to do so. Teachers will have to trust that administrators, who say they want to listen to teachers, are going to do so. Mutual trust really means mutual work on overcoming the negative effects of past feelings--in other words, spending less time thinking and talking about past mistakes and more time on thinking and talking about what it takes to change and improve.

It is approrpiate to the lessons I have learned about "little details" that my final comment should relate to the little detail of record keeping. As I planned this presentation I realized that without the record in the minutes I would not have recognized how speedy our progress as a committee really was, how records unify the purpose of a group, how important it is to have an accurate record to refer to and that without a record I would neither have learned the importance of attention to small details, and of listening to each other nor recognized the devasting effect of dwelling on mistakes when a partnership is born and trust must be built. So I cast one more vote for the importance of details that let others know their ideas are valued because they are recorded.